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Parker J. Bovée

University of California, Berkeley

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Negotiated Religious Meaning:
Qing and Nationalist Approaches to Religious Superscription

Parker J. Bovée

University of California, Berkeley

The popular religion of China leading up to the 20th century was defined by regional variation: the gods being celebrated usually differed by region, the values being communicated varied, and the participants in religious practices were diverse depending on location.¹ While these categories of analyzing Chinese religion did have discernable patterns – worship of similar myths such as Guandi, promotion of filial piety, and inclusion of political figures in religious ceremonies – the point of emphasis is that Chinese religion was highly decentralized and each village maintained a great deal of control over their religious practices and ideals. Using this condition of decentralization as a foundation, this essay will explore how both the Qing and Nationalist governments sought to shift varying aspects of religious beliefs and practices in the early 1900s and 1930s respectively. The specific changes analyzed will focus on Prasenjit Duara's idea of "institutional" and "symbolic" changes in relation to Qing and Nationalist efforts to reform religion.² Institutional change pertains to how religion was performed while symbolic change refers to the meanings associated with the religion.³ In doing so, the essay will first

¹ David Johnson, "Popular Values and Beliefs," in *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, ed. William Theodore de Bary (New York City: Columbia University Press, 1999), 73-75.

² Prasenjit Duara. "Superscribing Symbols: The Myth of Guandi, Chinese God of War," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 47, no. 4 (1988): 778.

³ Ibid.

analyze the success of the Qing superscription campaign of Guandi before moving on to examine how the Nationalists dealt with what they viewed as religious issues of greed and backwardness. Finally, the essay will culminate with a comparative analysis of the two cultural projects with special attention paid to how the two projects' messages differed and why this difference affected the success of each project.

While Chinese religion varied significantly from region to region, certain practices and beliefs enjoyed widespread popularity within the empire such as an emphasis on temples and the worship of Guandi.⁴ Both these specific traits were targeted by the Qing in their superscription campaign of the mythological figure Guandi.⁵ If analyzed with the model of Duara, as previously laid out, the Qing's increased control over temples as a way of influencing how Guandi was worshiped can be labeled as an institutional change to religion. Similarly, the Qing's attempt to associate the image of Guandi with Confucian and Imperial culture could be labeled a symbolic change as it transformed the beliefs associated with Guandi.

As previously stated, the myth of Guandi was celebrated in various ways across China. Duara depicts a brief history of the myth but focuses his attention on the fact that a simple myth with its focus on loyalty and little else became one of the most popular deities in China.⁶ Duara cites the popularity of the myth as a result of groups like Buddhists, Daoists, and merchants who co-opted Guandi as a symbol for their own needs. As the myth grew in popularity, the myth of Guandi took on more meanings and Guandi became the "god of loyalty, he becomes the god of wealth, the god of literature, the protector god of temples, and the patron god of actors, secret societies, and many others."⁷ While none of these meanings focus on the Qing superscription, I

⁴ Johnson, "Popular Values and Beliefs," 75; Duara, "Superscribing Symbols," 779.

⁵ Ibid, 784.

⁶ Ibid, 781.

⁷ Ibid.

have included them to demonstrate that religion in China was highly interpretive and flexible. The messages and meanings behind myths and religion could be reinterpreted by a group seeking to create a god to fit their own needs. This precedent of superscription is heavily applicable to the history of Guandi and, as will be shown shortly, the Qing used this very same model of assigning meaning when they looked to superscribe the image of Guandi to fit their imperial message.

The Qing were not the first empire to superscribe the image of Guandi with imperial meanings. Duara documented that dynasties had been focused on using Guandi as a mode of communicating their messages since the Song dynasty.⁸ While the Qing continued the imperial trend of promoting Guandi in the official cult, the dynasty took this practice a step further in 1853 when Guandi was promoted to the same sacrificial rank as Confucius.⁹ While this promotion of Guandi may have also been an attempt to build popular support through appeals to tradition against the Taiping rebels and their call for Christianity, the Qing still made the conscious choice of Guandi. The rationale for this choice was largely due to Guandi's widespread recognition as a deity. If the Qing were to garner widespread support for a superscribed deity, the deity itself would have to be popular throughout China. For this reason, Guandi was the perfect candidate for superscription as the myth had a variety of related meanings but all valued the same central character. The Qing sought to insert relationships of imperial authority into Guandi's mythology as can be seen through the *Guandi shengji tuzhi quanji*, a hagiographical style account of Guandi's life which Duara labeled a "massive effort to Confucianize Guandi."¹⁰ The ideal of transforming Guandi into a Confucius like figure focused on making the image of Guandi synonymous with the Imperial state and therefore attributing the

⁸ Ibid, 783.

⁹ Ibid, 784.

¹⁰ Ibid.

“well-being and long peace in the empire” partially to the deity and partially to the Empire.¹¹

The Qing built on the widespread adoration for Guandi by asserting that the peace achieved was partially attributed to Guandi yet elevated the position of the imperial government through association.

The Qing were not seeking to override the various interpretations of Guandi as a deity but rather to play off of them and supplement them. This relationship is exemplified by the recorded exchange from Shunyi County, Hebei in 1899 in which the village Earth god Tudi is contrasted with Guandi who “is concerned not merely with one village but also with the affairs of the entire nation.”¹² While the Qing would still have to live with widespread religious variation, they were able to cultivate a relationship between imperial authority and Guandi that often, but not always, superseded that of regional beliefs.

While the Qing were able to create an official image of Guandi, how were they able to disperse and popularize this image? Just as the Qing developed their official image of Guandi on the basis of preexisting images, they popularized their image through established institutions of popular religions such as temples. Communal rituals, festivals, processions, and operas are all highlighted by David Johnson as religious practices centered around the presence of the temple.¹³ Johnson focuses on the fact that these temples were “built by the people and [...] maintained by them” in a manner that was “quite independent of ecclesiastical or governmental prompting.”¹⁴ These temples were not only fundamental for a variety of religious activities but they were themselves, an institution solely reflecting the needs of its community. While the Qing government did not operate the temples, they did establish a reform in 1725 that created an

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid, 786.

¹³ Johnson, "Popular Values and Beliefs," 75-92.

¹⁴ Ibid, 75.

institutional hierarchy of Guandi temples in the empire.¹⁵ Duara emphasizes that these temples did not lose their local ideals or populace due to their affiliation with the government but rather “they [became] places where the official and nonofficial populace could mix” unlike the Confucian temples which became hubs for solely gentry officials.¹⁶ So not only did these temples become the conveyors of the new image of Guandi, but they communicated this message to both the local groups who had been frequenting the temple for generations as well as those more concerned with imperial status.

While the Qing’s messages were able to penetrate Chinese popular culture, the government’s definitions of religious symbols would, at best, only coexist with those that preceded them. This condition of coexistence did not suit the Nationalist government as they launched a massive anti-superstition campaign in the 1930s which targeted what they perceived as the wasteful, backward, and deceptive nature of Chinese popular religion. The objective of the Nationalists, therefore, differed quite substantially from that of the Qing; the Nationalists sought to utterly abolish not only the values but the practices of Chinese popular religion.

Rebecca Nedostup identified the Nationalists’ view of Chinese religion as having been corrupted by “delusion and chicanery.”¹⁷ This view was largely based on the enlightened style of thought that the Nationalist party members consigned themselves to. The party believed it had to lead the Chinese people to enlightenment to prepare the country for self-governance. However, Nationalist notions of enlightened thought and ideals frequently clashed with the fatalistic attitudes and practices of Chinese religion. Sherman Cochran’s translation of *One Day in China*:

¹⁵ Duara, “Superscribing Symbols,” 784.

¹⁶ Ibid, 785.

¹⁷ Rebecca Nedostup, “Ritual Competition and the Modernizing Nation-State,” In *Chinese Religiosities Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation*, ed. Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (University of California Press, 2008), 98.

May 21, 1936, details multiple festivals and their associated issues that all occurred on one day.¹⁸

Many of these festivals or other religious events emphasized the consumerism and deceit that had tainted Chinese religion. Examples of this included a march to a temple that involved an unrelenting focus on the importance of incense and the constant marketing of it and a group of priests who deceived hundreds of people into making donations through a chemical eye-wash.¹⁹

Nedostup also provides the example of the Ghost Festival as a way of addressing the Nationalist's concern with excessive spending on rituals.²⁰ These issues, identified by the Nationalists, were both institutional and symbolic in nature as both the physical practices and associated beliefs of these religious practices were detrimental to the Nationalists' hope of Chinese enlightenment. For this reason, the Nationalists pursued an ideology of completely uprooting Chinese religious practices and offering alternatives designated as culturally beneficial to the state by the Nationalists.

The Nationalists sought to reform religion in China through dismantling preexisting religion. This reform was carried out through the abolishment of the lunar calendar and its associated holidays as well as attacking the commodification of religion through bans of various goods and professions.²¹ Nationalist propaganda defended their abolition of the lunar calendar by deeming the calendar as "an obstacle to the progress of the National Revolution" and the "headquarters of superstition."²² The Nationalists hoped that by removing the lunar calendar, religious holidays and their associated meanings of deceit and backwardness would fall away together. The Nationalists even offered a replacement calendar, the Gregorian calendar. This new

¹⁸ Mao Dun et al., *One day in China, May 21, 1936* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), xi.

¹⁹ Ibid, 147-153.

²⁰ Nedostup, "Ritual Competition and the Modernizing Nation-State," in *Chinese Religiosities Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation*, 92.

²¹ Ibid, 102-108.

²² Ibid, 87.

calendar was populated with what Nedostup characterized as “government-led civic ceremonial[s] that would better define the pursuits and aspirations of the modern Chinese citizen.”²³ In other words, the Nationalists outlawed the Lunar calendar and many of its related festivals such as the Ghost Festival and replaced them with “inflexible” rituals designed to praise and promote the Nationalist regime.²⁴ The Nationalists also banned firecrackers and other associated goods in an attempt to halt continuing festivals and end the commodified state of religion.²⁵

The Nationalist government’s attempts at uprooting much of the Chinese religion predictably failed. Nedostup attributed this failure to the previously mentioned inflexibility of the government’s policies toward embracing aspects of popular religion, a severe inability to enforce the policies made to deal with religion, and a lack of entertaining aspects.²⁶ Nedostup lists the rationales for those who continued to use the calendar as focusing on agricultural or ancestral necessity but also mentions that many considered the banned calendar “fun.”²⁷ In the same vein, the outlawing of firecrackers and religious goods was short-lived once the Chinese populace decided that the government could not enforce it upon everyone.²⁸ The Nationalist alternatives simply were not appealing to the majority of Chinese. This can be attributed to the fact the Nationalists created their rituals not to appeal to the Chinese through fun calendars or loud firecrackers but to spread propaganda. While the two could be achieved simultaneously, this would have required the Nationalists to work with, not against the Chinese popular religion. Cooperation simply was not possible from the Nationalist perspective as they viewed themselves

²³ Ibid, 88.

²⁴ Ibid, 107.

²⁵ Ibid, 108.

²⁶ Ibid, 110.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid, 108.

as fighting against backwardness and delusion. Despite this, some Chinese did embrace Nationalist ideals within rituals as can be seen in the Ghost Festival and the Procession for the Gods in Cibeï in which Nationalist symbols and flags were incorporated centrally into the activities.²⁹ The integration of the two entities was not only possible but it occurred even despite the Nationalists' heavy-handed approach, therefore showing a willingness on the part of the Chinese people to negotiate the meanings of their religious views.

In many ways, the two projects could not have varied more extremely. Symbolically, the Qing actively based their superscription campaign on the ideals generated by the Chinese for hundreds of years while the Nationalists blatantly ignored tradition and sought to root it out. Institutionally, the Nationalists completely failed to develop any form of relatable institutional changes in order to propagate their messages amongst the Chinese people while the Qing created a system of temples that appealed across social, religious, and political classes. Despite the vast differences in execution, both states did seek out the similar end goal of elevating the image of the state through religion. The inability of the Nationalists to negotiate with the Chinese populace over their religious beliefs was ultimately why their campaign proved so unsuccessful while the Qing blended imperial themes with a preexisting symbol to create an aspect of religion negotiated between the religious needs of the people and the political desires of the state.

About the author

²⁹ Ibid, 104; Mao et al., *One day in China, May 21, 1936*. 171.1

Parker J. Bovée is currently a second-year student in UC Berkeley's History department. Professionally he hopes to pair his study of history with a career in education at the university level.

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